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# The visible migration of pipits *(Anthus)* and wagtails *(Motacilla)* near Suez (Egypt), Autumn 1981

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## Introduction

Systematic counts of the diel and seasonal migration of passerines have been extensively carried out in Western Europe (e. g. CROUSAZ 1961, DORKA 1966, ULFSTRAND et al. 1974). The information for Eastern Europe is much less detailed (FEENY, ARNOLD & BAILEY 1968, KUMERLOEVE 1957, 1972, SUTHERLAND & BROOKS 1981) and the same applies for the Middle East (CHRISTENSEN 1962, SAFRIEL 1968, KRABBE 1980). The many gaps in the knowledge of passerine migration in the Mediterranean are clearly pointed out by MOREAU (1972).

In this paper the seasonal and diel passage of pipits and wagtails near Suez during the autumn of 1981 will be described, supplemented with observations on behaviour and habitat choice of resting birds.

## Local topography and climate

Suez is situated at the northern edge of the Gulf of Suez and is surrounded by vast, mountainous deserts. The Attaqa mountain extends for 120 km west of Suez and reaches the Gulf of Suez close to Adabiya, a village 15 km south of Suez. Maximum height of the mountain is 871 m. The bay of Suez is fringed with extensive mudflats. Vegetation is sparse everywhere, except for some small, oasis-like patches with palmtrees. Port Tewfik, the harbour of Suez, lies at the entrance of the Suez Canal and provides an excellent view over the Sinai.

The weather was very consistent during the observation period with hardly any cloud formation except for the last pentade of October and during November. Visibility was generally good, although a haze in the distance prevented a real excellent view. The wind usually came from directions between NW and NNE with windforces of 2—4 (5) Beaufort. The temperature fluctuated between 28 and 35°C.

## Methods

During 4 September up to and including 5 November 1981 the raptor migration over Suez was counted during 57 days. Observations were made from (8.00) 9.00—17.00 (18.00) hrs local time. The recording of the passage of birds of prey was the main study objective, so that the documentation of passerine migration obtained less attention during hours of peak movement. However, most passerines passed before 9.00 hr (Fig. 1) while the raptors usually did not start their flight before ten o'clock. All species mentioned in this paper flew below 100 m during migration and were detected and identified by their diagnostic calls. Birds which were only heard, were written down as a single specimen and were not included when calculating mean flock size. All records relate to active migrants, viz. birds heading south in a directed flight.

Observations were made from the shore near Attaqa during September and the first few days of October. Later on, a new observation site was chosen in Port Tewfik on the roof of a ten floor building.

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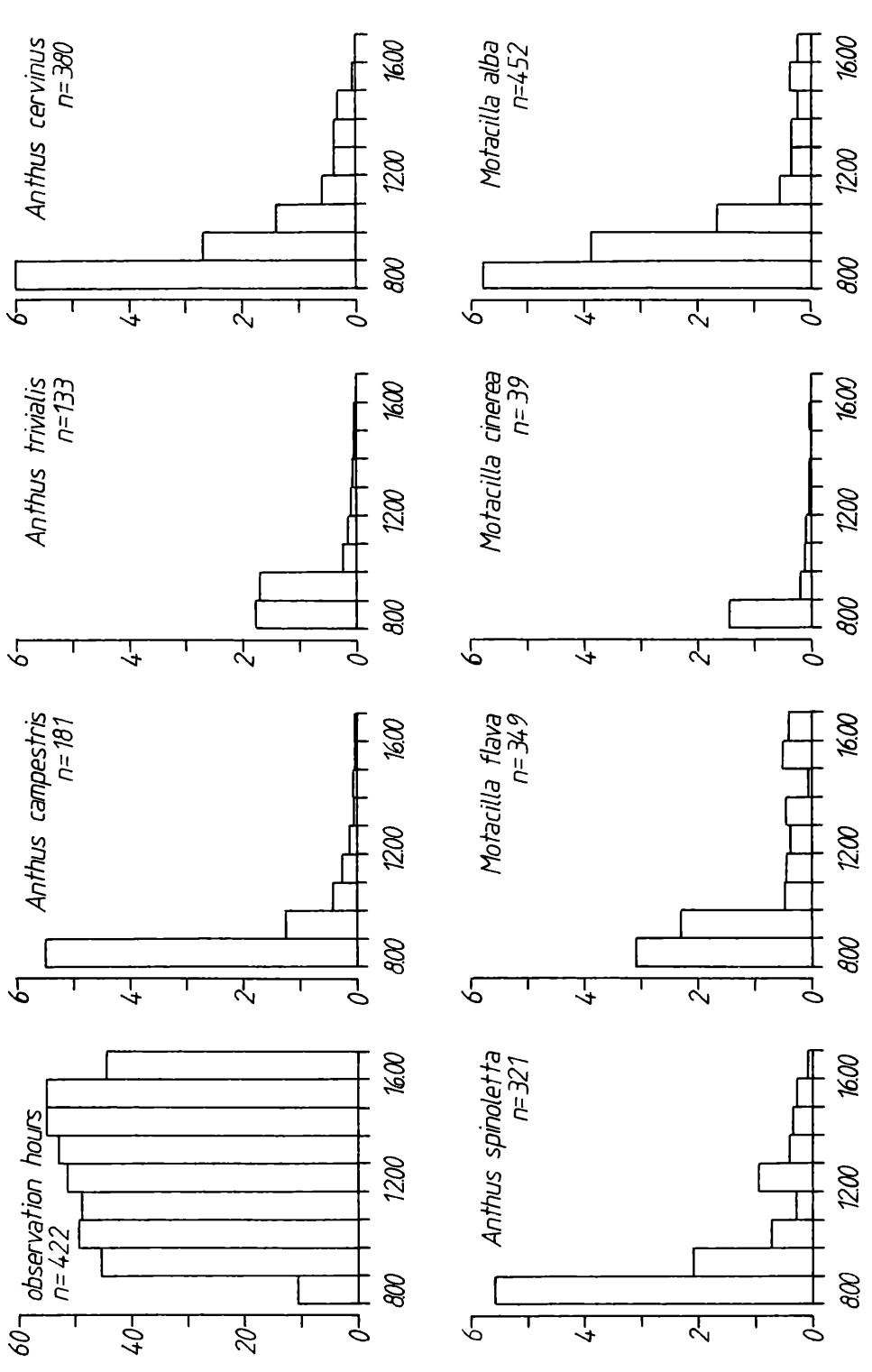
Fig. 1: Diel migration of pipits and wagtails near Suez during the period 8.00—17.00 hrs, shown as average number of migrants per hour.

*Abb. 1: Tageszeitliche Verteilung der Zugbeobachtungen von Piepern und Stelzen nahe Suez in der Zeit von 8.00 bis 17.00 Uhr; angegeben ist für die einzelnen Stunden jeweils die mittlere Anzahl registrierter Vögel der betreffenden Art.*



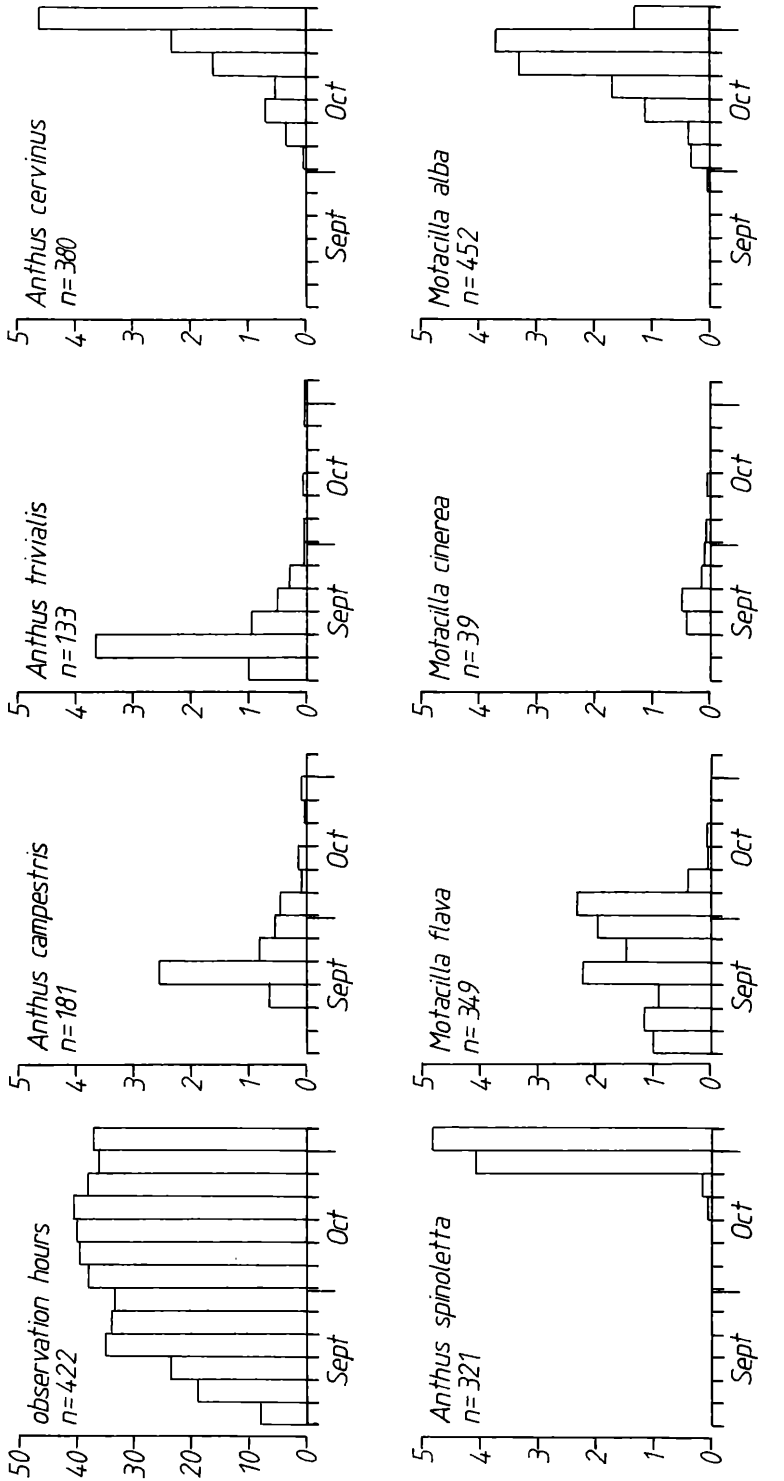



Fig. 2: Seasonal migration of pipits and wagtails near Suez during 4 September till 5 November 1981, shown as average number of migrants per hour per pentade.

*Abb. 2: Jahreszeitliche Verteilung der Zugbeobachtungen von Piepern und Stelzen nahe Suez vom 4. September bis 5. November 1981; angegeben ist für die einzelnen Pentaden jeweils die mittlere Anzahl registrierter Vögel der betreffenden Art je Stunde.*

## Results

Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae:* Singles were seen on 18 and 19 October in respectively Port Tewfik and Attaqa. Both were migrating southwards. On 6 October 1980 one Richard's Pipit was seen migrating near Suez (MEININGER, BAHA EL DIN & MULLIÉ 1981). All palearctic populations are migratory and winter from India to Malaysia. In Egypt it is an uncommon winter visitor (MEINERTZHAGEN 1930) but recent records are remarkably scarce (pers. comm. P. L. MEININGER). In Elat, southern Israel, this species is a scarce migrant and winter visitor from the end of October till the end of March (KRABBE 1980).

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris:* Between 14 September and 31 October 181 Tawny Pipits passed through, with a maximum of 50 ex. on 18 September (Fig. 2). Mean flock size was 3.2 ex. (n = 41, variation = 1—11). Small flocks were seen everywhere in the surroundings of Suez, mainly foraging on dry sandy soils with a sparse vegetation. While foraging, they frequently mixed with Short-toed Larks *Calandrella cinerea.* The maximum number of foraging birds was counted during a 5 km walk along the Gulf of Suez on 20 September: 124 ex. in 17 flocks. — In Europe most migration takes place during August and the first half of September (CROUSAZ 1961, RENDAHL 1968b, SHARROCK 1974, BIJLSMA 1978). The first birds arrive in their winter quarters (including Egypt) from medio October onwards (GROTE 1930, pers. comm. P. L. MEININGER). This pattern fits with the observations in Suez. In contrast to Suez, the Tawny Pipit is remarkably scarce in Elat during autumn (SAFRIEL 1968).

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis:* Migration between 4 September and 5 November with a peak during mid-September (max. 40 ex. on 10 September). Part of the migration certainly took place before the observations were started (Fig. 2) which is consistent with the migration period in Europe (SPAEPEN 1953, CROUSAZ 1961, RENDAHL 1968b) and the arrival dates in East Africa (GROTE 1930). Mean flock size was 2.2 ex. (n = 30, variation = 1—6). The few resting birds were found in places with small trees and a luxurious undergrowth of grass.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis:* Two migrating flocks of 4 and 3 ex. were seen on 5 November in Port Tewfik. This species is fairly common in Elat during November until March (KRABBE 1980). The same applies for the North Sinai, the Faiyum, the Delta and the surroundings of Suez in Egypt (MEINERTZHAGEN 1930, pers. comm. P. L. MEININGER).

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus:* Between 3 October and 5 November 380 birds were recorded. A substantial passage probably took place after 5 November (SAFRIEL 1968). This species was certainly more numerous than indicated in Fig. 2 because many birds were heard only. Mean flock size was 7.8 ex. (n = 56, variation = 1—25). Resting Red-throated Pipits preferred areas with a fairly luxurious growth of short grass and patchily distributed water. In Europe (HUBER 1956, NIETHAMMER 1957, RENDAHL 1968b) as well as in Israel (SAFRIEL 1968) the migration starts much earlier than in Suez, viz. at the end of August.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta:* Migration from 21 October onwards, and most probably continuing in large numbers in November (Fig. 2). Considerable passage was recorded during the first days of November, e. g. 93 ex. on 2 November. Mean flock size was 4.1 ex (n = 61, variation = 1—26). At the end of October and during November the Water Pipit was common everywhere around Suez. On 29 October, for example, 950 ex. were counted on a pre-roost gathering at 17.30 hr, just north of Suez where they were foraging amidst sewage. In Elat this species is fairly common from the end of October until medio April (KRABBE 1980).

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava:* Passage between 5 September and 17 October (Fig. 2) but probably started earlier (SPAEPEN 1957, RENDAHL 1968a). Only 12 birds were properly seen and belonged to the nominate race. Mean flock size was 4.1 ex. (n = 37, variation = 1—29). This species was abundant in the vicinity of Suez during peak migration and could be found in a wide variety of habitats. On 20 September at least 250 ex. were present along the shore of the Gulf of Suez near Attaqa. Elsewhere in the Middle East it is also a very common migrant (CHRISTENSEN 1962, FEENY, ARNOLD & BAILEY 1968, SAFRIEL 1968).

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea:* A scarce migrant from 14 September up to and including 16 October (Fig. 2). As in the Yellow Wagtail migration probably started before 14 September, although the few birds in Elat occur at the end of October till medio November (KRABBE 1980). Mean flock size was 2.5 ex. (n = 15, variation = 1—6).

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba:* Migration between 29 September and 5 November, but

certainly still passing thereafter (Fig. 2). Maximum passage took place during the last decade of October, viz. 79 ex. on 27 October. Mean flock size was 3.1 ex. (n = 46, variation = 1—9). Many foraging birds were present along the coast of the Gulf of Suez and near the slaughterhouse where hundreds of sheep seemed to be very attractive to White Wagtails. In Europe it is a common migrant during October (KUMERLOEVE 1957, 1972, CROUSAZ 1961), as is the case in the Middle East, where large numbers are wintering from October onwards (GROTE 1930, MEINERTZHAGEN 1930, SAFRIEL 1968).

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## Zusammenfassung

Vom 4. September bis 5. November 1981 wurde der Greifvogelzug in der Umgebung von Suez (Ägypten) gezählt. Daneben erfolgten planmäßige Zugbeobachtungen an Piepern und Stelzen. Die Ergebnisse sind in Abb. 1 und 2 zusammengefaßt. Außerdem wurden Bemerkungen über Truppgröße und Biotopansprüche gemacht.

## Summary

During the period 4 September up to and including 5 November 1981 the raptor migration near Suez (Egypt) was counted. At the same time the migration of pipits and wagtails was recorded (Fig. 1 and 2). Furthermore, observations were made on flock size and habitat choice.

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